

Understanding Jurisdictions and Places in Ireland

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Any given place in Ireland is part of multiple government, church and social jurisdictions.

The island of Ireland is about the size of the state of Indiana. Historically, it is made up of four provinces and 32 counties. The four provinces with their counties are:

Connaught – Galway, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon and Sligo

Leinster – Carlow, Dublin, Kildare, Kilkenny, Laois (Queens), Longford, Louth, Meath, Offaly (Kings), Westmeath, Wexford, and Wicklow

Munster – Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Tipperary, and Waterford

Ulster – Antrim, Armagh, Cavan, Derry (Londonderry), Donegal, Down, Fermanagh, Monaghan and Tyrone

Of the nine Ulster counties, six (Antrim, Armagh, Londonderry, Down and Fermanagh) became the Northern Ireland part of the United Kingdom.

Types of Jurisdictions: Government

Counties

Ireland is divided into counties, 26 in the Republic of Ireland and 6 in Northern Ireland.

Probate Districts

In 1858, an Irish Principal Probate Registry was created along with eleven district registries for the sole purposes of dealing with matters of probate.

Baronies

Now obsolete, historically, counties were further divided into baronies in the 16th century. Ultimately there were 331 baronies in all Ireland. The governmental role of the barony however was minimal. Until 1898 baronies had some modest taxation and spending functions.

Poor Law Unions

Under the Poor Relief Act of 1838, Ireland was divided into Poor Law Unions in a similar way to England in 1834. By 1850, there were 163 unions and in 1898, the Local Government Act adopted the union as the basic administrative division in place of the civil parish.

Civil Parishes

There are more than 2400 civil parishes in Ireland.

Traditionally, civil parish boundaries corresponded to the Church of Ireland parish boundaries. Over time in the late 1700's and early 1800's, government-like responsibilities traditionally performed by the Church of Ireland such as taxation, caring for the poor, maintaining roads, and administering justice were taken over by civil parishes.

Townlands

The smallest jurisdiction in Irish research will probably be the townland.

A townland is not a town nor is it a township in the United States sense. It is the smallest official land division in Ireland.

It does not have its own government. It is a surveyed parcel of land ranging from a few acres to several thousand acres though the average size is about 350 acres. There are approximately 64,000 townlands in Ireland. Parish, parish, tax and other records often record the townland in which someone is living.

Types of Jurisdictions: Church

Diocese (Roman Catholic & Anglican)

The jurisdiction of diocese can be a bit confusing because there were two prominent religions using the term as a primary jurisdiction. The Church of Ireland, or in other words, the Church of England in Ireland, came to Ireland in the 1500's. They adopted a similar number of dioceses as was already established by the Roman Catholic Church since the 1100's. Both religion had 22 dioceses in four provinces (Armagh, Cashel, Dublin.

Church of Ireland (Anglican) Parishes

The Church of Ireland parish boundaries were effectively established in the 1600's. The requirement to keep registers dates to 1634 though only 49 Church of Ireland parishes have registers that begin prior to 1700.

Most of the registers that survive date between 1770 and 1820. In 1869, the Church of Ireland was disestablished as the state church of Ireland and in 1875 and 1876, legislation was passed that registers of baptisms and burials to 1870 and marriages up to 31 March 1845 be deposited at the Public Record Office in Dublin.

1,006 Church of Ireland parishes (more than half) had complied with this request and when the Public Record Office burned in 1922, of these, four are believed to have survived with another 637 surviving in local custody.

Because of transcripts of parish registers made prior to the fire, the estimate is that roughly 2/3rds of pre-1870 Church of Ireland parish registers were destroyed.

Roman Catholic Parishes

Often the name of the Roman Catholic parish may be different from that of the local Church of Ireland or civil parishes. Because the Roman Catholic Church was not the established Church of Ireland, its registers were not deposited at the Public Record Office and therefore not affected by the fire.

Presbyterian Congregations

The Presbyterian Church is the third largest religious group in Ireland.

It was introduced into Ireland when the Scottish settled on plantations predominantly in the Province of Ulster. Presbyterians did not follow the parish structure like the Church of Ireland or Roman Catholics. Rather, congregations were formed as needed based on the growth of the church without strict parish boundaries. Records also tend to be lacking for the Presbyterian Church, for example marriages performed by Presbyterian ministers were not considered legal until 1782 and a marriage between a Presbyterian and member of the Church of Ireland was not considered legal until 1845. The earliest surviving register dates to 1674 however it was not until 1819 that the Synod required a register be kept and many don't actually start until 1830.

Understanding Levels of Jurisdiction

Jurisdictions from large to small –

- Country
- Province
- County
- Barony

Poor Law Union
Parish
Townland

Keep in mind that quite often houses and farms had (and still have) a name. So if there appears to be a name where your ancestors came from beyond the townland, it could possibly be the name of the house or farm.

Thus making the possible levels of jurisdiction –

Country
Province
County
Barony
Poor Law Union
Parish
Townland
House or Farm name

Root Words for Irish Place and Town Names

Websites with meanings of Gaelic place and town names –

<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~irlker/resgeoterm.html>

<http://www.dochara.com/the-irish/place-names/irish-placenames-c/>

Online Sources

A Vision of Britain

<http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk>

Ask About Ireland

<http://www.askaboutireland.ie/griffith-valuation/>

Alphabetical Index to Townlands & Towns –

The IreAtlas Townland Data Base –

<http://www.thecore.com/seanruad>

Lewis' Topographical Dictionary –

www.libraryireland.com/topog

Maps and Gazetteers –

www.genuki.org.uk

Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland – Online at Google Books –

<http://books.google.com/books?id=KMtAAAAAYAAJ&dq=Parliamentary%20gazetteer%20of%20Ireland&source=gbs>